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Exploring social constructions of bereaved people's identity in mainland China: a qualitative approach

Abstract

The context of mainland China remains under-researched in the bereavement literature. This article reports on a qualitative study on bereaved people's experience in mainland China in light of their relational beings, uncovering varied applications of cultural emphases on harmony in their ongoing lives. By collecting and analysing qualitative data from a sample of 31 bereaved people, a largely traditional but changing picture of the bereavement experience is captured. The findings highlight the predominant values of harmony and familism in shaping the Chinese bereaved people's identities in their ongoing lives. This article examines the idea of relational beings in the context of mainland China by shedding light on the reported experience of bereavement, and thus, furthers the ongoing debates on socio-cultural constructions of bereaved people's identities. Accordingly, this paper provides researchers and practitioners with an in-depth narrative of bereaved people's experience in this largely under researched society, providing theoretical and empirical evidence to inform future studies, as well as bereavement support and policy-making in China.

Keywords: bereavement, mainland China, relational beings, identity, harmony, family

Introduction

Losing a loved one can threaten people's identity and question their social participation in a broad context (Valentine, 2013). Ongoing debates have captured and contested a range of complex and even contrasting models of bereaved people's identities in light of individualism and interdependency (e.g. Lawton, 2000; Valentine, 2007b). However, China, which is famous for its emphasis on collectivity and relationality, has been largely neglected in the debates. A large body of literature has illustrated the social constructions of bereaved people's identities in western cultures and elsewhere (e.g. Marris, 1974; Valentine, 2010; Evans et al., 2016). Moreover, a number of studies have been conducted on bereaved people from Chinese cultures outside the mainland, such as in Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and the US, highlighting roles of traditional values of family and relationality in shaping bereaved people's experience (e.g. Chan et al., 2005; Ho & Brotherson, 2007; Hsu, et al., 2004; Yick & Gupta, 2002). With a more direct interest in mainland China, some researchers have paid attention to particular aspects of the bereavement experience, including death rituals and grief reactions (e.g. Watson & Rawski, 1990; Pressman & Bonanno, 2007), or specific groups of bereaved Chinese people (e.g. Lou & Chan, 2006; Zheng, Lawson, & Barbara, 2015). Despite the rich discussions on the dynamic and interactive picture of the constructions of bereaved people's identities, there is lack of a focus on bereaved people from mainland China, which has a distinctive cultural and political background. In particular, the extant literature on Chinese cultures provides limited understanding of the complex picture of bereavement, which involves not only grieving and mourning, but also an ongoing social process of revision and adaption in various respects of life (Attig, 2011). To address this gap, this paper reports on an in-depth investigation aimed at capturing Chinese bereaved people's experiences by analysing a set of qualitative data collected in 2016. In light of bereavement as a socio-cultural experience, this article illustrates how culture speaks through bereaved Chinese people's ongoing lives and their identities (Geertz, 1983).

Socio-cultural background

China is a largely collectivist and relational society where social conformity is prioritised (Stockman, 2013; Triandis, 1988). Long-standing Confucianism has promoted a culture defined by social harmony between individuals and groups. In light of social stratification and interpersonal relationships, Confucian ethics have developed a range of hierarchical structures in people's social and family lives, expecting people to perform strictly prescribed roles to exchange support and seek a sense of security and belonging within their social networks (Bedford & Hwang, 2003). As such, Chinese people are often defined through their group memberships rather than their individuality. As a member, people are also obligated to maintain 'harmony' (*he*, in Chinese) within their groups by stabilising and developing resources for support and membership (Li, 2006). To achieve social harmony, Chinese people often seek acceptance and admiration from others by emphasising other group members' needs and further highlighting the authoritative position of groups (Hwang, 2012; Qi, 2017; Goffman, 1956). As such, Chinese people tend to perceive themselves as relational beings, largely conforming to interpersonal harmony and collective values within their social groups (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

As a primary social institution, the family can play a determining role in defining the sense of harmony for individuals in the forms of supporting and regulating their lives in various respects (Slote & De Vos, 1998). While receiving benefits from the family, individual members are obligated to provide support to both other living family members as well as deceased ancestral kinship figures. To maintain and recover reciprocity within the family, traditional scripts, especially Confucian ethics, have developed the traditions of filial piety and ancestor worship (Moise, 2013; Watson and Rawski, 1990). By conducting family practices with both living and deceased family members, individuals in China are likely to develop their sense of identity, with close reference to relationships and values shared within their family (Morgan, 2011; Zhang, 2016).

While China has long established an emphasis on social harmony and family values, the social and political changes in contemporary Chinese history have dramatically shaped people's relationships with traditions and subsequently, their sense of identity (Stockman, 2013). After the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the socialist doctrines largely overtook the roles of traditions, such as Confucian family systems and religions, in shaping people's beliefs and practices in everyday life. As such, the collectivity and relationality of Chinese people were redefined by subordination to a larger entity, that of the party-state, rather than family kinships and local communities (Yan, 2010). While retaining the collectivist and socialist values described above, the economic reforms since the late 1970s have led to considerable relaxing of the restrictions on traditions (Hansen & Svarverud, 2010; Moise, 2013). In particular, in light of family values, the obligations of care exchange between family members have been further defined and reinforced through a series of legislation, such as the Marriage Law. Despite the economic growth having fostered a notable rise in individualism in recent years, individual agency is often constrained, and individual identity is largely shaped by conformity to collective values of the family and party-state interests (Yan, 2010). As a result, the Chinese relational beings are embodied with largely family-centred values, while living with a complex of mixed and even sometimes competing values involving both collectivist and individualised discourses.

Death and bereavement in mainland China

Beliefs and practices of death and bereavement have vividly reflected the changing positions of collective scripts in society. Traditionally, a variety of rituals and customs was involved in the event of the death of a family member, redefining family relationships and roles for both the dead and the living in spiritual and interactive ways (Watson & Rawski, 1990). A series of transitional rituals, such as services on each seventh day within 49 days after death (Kiong, 2004), could transform the deceased into a heavenly and often ancestral figure, who was believed to have the power to shape

the fortune of the living. By incorporating beliefs and practices from Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and other traditions, the veneration of ancestors has long been developed, nurturing reciprocal relationships between the survivors and their deceased family members (Lakos, 2010). To seek protection and blessings from their ancestors, the living family members tend to engage in annual commemorations and daily practices to honour the deceased by performing rituals and providing offerings, such as food and paper money (Ahern, 1973; Freedman, 1966; Hu & Tian, 2018; Thompson, 1990; Zhang, 2015). When preserving such mutual relationships with the ancestors, bereaved people in China are often expected or feel pressured to restrain sorrow and adapt to changes to fulfil their family responsibilities for living family members (Li, 2015). As such, bereaved Chinese people's family roles are profoundly shaped by their interdependence with both living and dead family members for the primary concern of maintaining and continuing the family (Slote & De Vos, 1998).

With the introduction of the atheistic and collectivist doctrines of socialism, however, bereaved Chinese people's family responsibilities were greatly simplified between 1949 and the late 1970s. These changes had led to suppression and even the abolition of many traditional discourses, such as beliefs and practices of religions, spirituality and ancestor veneration (Zuo, 1991). Meanwhile, the introduction of cremation, due to the concern about limited agricultural land, also affected the thousands of years long tradition of burials (Mates, 2016). As a result, bereaved people's roles were strongly challenged in relation to fostering and maintaining relationships with the deceased and often an ancestor. Following the socioeconomic reforms of the late 1970s, the impacts of socialist secularisation and increasing individualisation provided bereaved people with more individualised ways to handle and make sense of their loss, although the collectivist values, including family values, other traditional norms and conformity to the wider society, remain predominant (Yan, 2010).

Research on bereavement in Chinese culture

Despite the distinctive socio-cultural contexts, experiences of bereaved people in mainland China remain little known in the academic literature. In general, the extant literature has explored various cultures in light of the socio-cultural constructions of bereaved people's experience and their identities. For example, Valentine's studies (e.g. 2007a; 2010; 2013) captured different positions of traditional and individual values in British and Japanese society, powerfully illustrating how interacting with social discourses can shape bereaved people's sense of identity. Marris (1974) and Evans et al. (2016) examined the process of identity reconstruction, by looking at how post-war widows in London and bereaved family members in urban Senegal redefined their roles in their material, social and emotional lives.

Some studies have also caught a glimpse of traditional values and norms both outside and inside mainland China regarding their roles in shaping bereaved people's experience. By studying terminally-ill patients and their families in Hong Kong, Mak (2007) developed a relation-based 'harmonious death' model, examining how Confucian thoughts and religious beliefs can shape Chinese people's views on death and themselves. Looking at bereaved people in Hong Kong, Koo et al. (2005) emphasised the importance of traditional expectations, especially family roles and obligations, in shaping bereaved people's self-identity in relation to their loss. Similarly, a study on bereaved parents in Macau, a former Portuguese colony in China, also captured a clear presentation of relational beings in their experience of making sense of their child loss and maintaining their parenthood (Ho & Brotherson, 2007). A Taiwanese study reported a more dynamic aspect of the cultural influence by documenting the sense of harmony and wholeness as strong motivators impacting on people's adaption to their loss (Hsu et al., 2004). By studying people with Chinese origins in the US, Hsu, O'Connor and Lee (2009) and Yick and Gupta (2002) also evidenced strong influences from traditional Chinese beliefs, illuminating how

family hierarchy, ancestor worship and religions are inherited and integrated into their perceptions of death, bereavement and themselves.

Moreover, studies on mainland China have tended to focus on specific aspects or groups of bereaved people. Some researchers have shown interests in death rituals in China and explored how these rituals have shaped Chinese people's identities in relation to family values and ancestor worship (e.g. Watson and Rawski, 1990). Another popular area of study is psychology, for which western models and frameworks have tended to be used to examine grief reactions in the Chinese context. Lalande and Bonanno (2006) and Pressman and Bonanno (2007) compared bereaved people in China and the US in light of their experience of continuing bonds and grief processing, eliciting positive impacts of family and social involvement in China on long-term adjustment to loss. In addition, there is a body of studies investigating particular groups of bereaved parents in China. For example, Lou and Chan (2005) analysed relational grief reactions of parents of children with cancer in Shanghai by exploring their perceived relational responsibilities as parents, family and social members. Researchers have also paid increasing attention to a group of bereaved parents whose only child died in the context of the One-Child Policy and who are often referred to as 'Shidu' parents in Mandarin. Given Shidu is a recent social phenomenon, the majority of studies have been quantitatively focused on assessment of these parents' grief outcomes and impacts on their lives (e.g. Wei, Jiang, & Gietel-Basten, 2016; Zheng, Lawson, & Barbara, 2015; Chen et al., 2017). While a few qualitative studies have illuminated how familism and interdependence are key factors in shaping their post-mortem identities (e.g. Fang, 2018; Zhang & Jia, 2018).

Indeed, the extant literature has shed some light on the relational and collective nature of Chinese bereaved people's experience, emphasising the influence of traditional norms and family values. However, these studies have not clearly illustrated how relational beings can shape and be shaped by socio-cultural experience in their bereavement. Furthermore, given the distinctive socio-cultural background and diverse populations in mainland China, further research is needed to analyse and

reflect the complex social constructions of bereaved peoples' identities. To this end, this paper reports on a qualitative study carried out in mainland China in 2016, to offer a more in-depth insight into the process of how bereaved Chinese people use available socio-cultural scripts to make sense of their loss and themselves in their ongoing lives.

Methods

To gain insight into Chinese people's bereavement experience, I collected qualitative data from 31 individuals in mainland China in 2016, including 21 primary interviews and 10 secondary narratives. Due to the sensitive nature of bereavement and death taboo in China, a sympathetic and flexible approach was adopted to collect the data via a variety of platforms, including governmental and non-governmental organisations, personal networks and the internet. The 21 primary interviews were conducted in a semi-structured style with open-ended questions. This approach allowed the interviewees to lead the conversation to reconstruct their lived experience of bereavement. Informed consent was obtained from the participants prior to the interviews. In Hefei, Anhui Province, I volunteered on two local community committees and in a social work centre to seek support from gatekeepers. As such, I was able to gain access to and recruit participants, resulting in the conducting of interviews with three Shidu parents and five other types of bereaved people. In Huaihua, Hunan Province, with help from a local government official, another five interviews were conducted with Shidu parents from a local self-help group. Furthermore, personal networks were used to collect data from four interviewees who had lost their family members other than an only child. Due to physical distance and personal preferences, four online interviews via a chat software QQ were conducted with three Shidu parents and one bereaved sister from different parts of the country.

In addition, I used ten secondary narratives, including seven written accounts and three Television interviews. The majority of the primary interviews were conducted with relatively older people in both governmental and non-governmental organisations, due to these organisations' primary concern with supporting older people. Online posts about the bereavement experiences of younger generations were selectively collected from a website named *Zhihu*, a platform where people can share their feelings and thoughts anonymously. Three television interviews were also included in the dataset from national and regional television networks. The three interviews contain conversations with two Shidu mothers and one middle-age bereaved man. The 31 narratives represent a diverse sample of bereaved people in China, regarding their geographical location, socioeconomic background and educational level. The ages of the interviewees ranged from 20s to early 90s. All the interviewees had been bereaved for more than one year at the time of the interview. In order to protect these bereaved people's confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used. Following the data collection, these narratives were transcribed and subsequently translated from Mandarin into English. By using NVivo 11, an inductive approach and a thematic analysis method were adopted to identify and categorise themes to capture the socio-cultural dynamics of these bereaved people's everyday experience.

Findings

Research has suggested that losing a loved one may require revision of bereaved people's everyday lives, involving adjusting and reconstructing one's daily habits, relationships and identities (Attig, 2011; Parkes, 1988; Valentine, 2007a, 2013; Walter, 1999). The data widely reflect such an ongoing process, highlighting the bereaved people's relational beings with reference to harmony. As mentioned above, harmony is a core value lying at the heart of collectivist and relational traditions in Chinese culture. By recognising and emphasising cooperation between different individuals and groups, the idea of harmony calls for a holistic and contextual approach to defining roles and responsibilities for each

party in relation to others (Li, 2006). As such, all the parties are expected to contribute mutually to the stability and continuity of groups (*ibid.*). As captured by the narratives, the pursuit of harmony was often defined within a family context, providing references for the bereaved people to make sense of their loss and themselves. Three broad themes were generated to capture the ongoing process of social constructions of their relational beings in the light of harmony. These three themes are 'harmony as taken-for-granted before death', 'emphasising harmony at death and dying' and 'redefining harmony after death'.

Harmony as taken-for-granted before death

The bereaved people tended to recollect their life experience prior to loss as part of their bereavement narratives, showing how harmony had been deeply rooted in their interpersonal relationships and selfhood. The related accounts often depict the harmonious nature of their relationship with the loved one. Reciprocity and family values were addressed to explain their experience and define themselves in relation to their loved one in their ongoing lives. To capture how their relational beings had been developed and established in association with the loved one before death, three sub-themes: 'care and support exchange', 'family responsibilities' and 'expectations for the future' were introduced.

Care and support exchange

When recollecting their experience before loss, the bereaved people often described an intimate relationship with their loved one. The intimacy, as revealed, was strongly developed from their everyday experience of exchanging care and support with that person. A single mother in her 70s highlighted how supporting and being supported by her two deceased sons had been central to her life:

I, alone, spent years to bring up my two sons and one daughter. I had to scavenge garbage and beg on the street to make a living. But it was worth it. My sons promised me they would give me the best care they could, and they did so. They had been very filial to me. (Li)

Even for those who shared relatively distant relationships with the deceased before death, the experience of mutual care and support could still be a key factor in seeking a harmonious nature in their relationships. A mother sought to highlight the intimacy with her 'hysterical' son:

He used to be hysterical, shouting at his dad and me. His dad almost had a fight with him because of his inappropriate attitudes. But he was not totally an evil person. He cared about us. For example, he bought coats for us in the winter several years ago. (Lu)

These bereaved people tended to define their relationships with the deceased in terms of exchanging and receiving care and support. These narratives emphasised harmony in the forms of reciprocity and dependence developed with their loved one in a family context before death.

Family responsibilities

Given the family's primary role in providing care exchange has been both culturally and legally defined, the bereaved people often referred to their responsibilities and family identities to interpret and justify their relationships and interactions with their loved one. A son considered taking care of his paralysed mother a means of fulfilling his filial responsibilities:

We had a rotation for duties so there was always one of us there looking after her. It was very hard, but she was my mum who brought me into the world and raised me. I had the responsibilities. (Ang)

By practising their family responsibilities, the bereaved people could have their family membership affirmed. A father recalled his son's filial actions in relation to his fatherhood:

His mum left us when he was two months old. I raised him alone. He was taking good care of me as I am his father who has sacrificed a lot for him. (Guo)

Expectations for the future

Based on the strong sense of being a family member, some people expressed their expectations for the continuity of their family relationships with their loved one. Given care and support were often exchanged in a family context, their expectations were largely reciprocal and family-orientated, reflecting their taken-for-granted sense of family roles and responsibilities. For example, a grandson had planned a future to repay his grandfather for his support:

I planned to do lots of things for my grandpa after I graduated from university. When I became financially independent, I could buy good stuff for him and take him to go travelling across the country, just like what he used to do for me. (Qiao)

For bereaved parents, especially those who had lost an only child, their expectations included the prospect of being supported by their child as they grew older. Thus, one mother had seen her daughter as the main resource for her elderly care:

We did everything we could to raise our daughter. All we wanted was that she could look after us when we are getting old. (Mai)

The expectations expressed by these bereaved people reflect the importance of harmony in their ongoing lives, in relation to being able to exchange care and support with their loved one. By practising and expecting such reciprocal relationships, they had constructed their identities as relational beings in close reference to their family responsibilities and roles before their loss.

Emphasising harmony at death and dying

In the Chinese context, dying and death can be strongly shaped by the pursuit of harmony both for the dying person and the rest of the family. Many bereaved people recollected their experience of witnessing their loved one's dying and death. Their narratives clearly conveyed socio-cultural impact on their perceptions of deterioration and distress involved in the process. A number of bereaved people shared their views on harmony in relation to a physically peaceful dying and pain-free death of their loved one. From a cultural perspective, the harmonious nature of their loved one's departure was also reflected in a wide range of scripts around reciprocity and family ties. Two sub-themes, 'family involvement' and 'neglected individual agency' come to the fore. These highlight the socio-cultural shaping of how the bereaved people sought justification and meaning in the experience of dying and death of their loved one and how they situated themselves in such distressing circumstances.

Family involvement

In the narratives, a 'good' death was commonly defined by a peaceful dying without extensive physical suffering. For many people, the family was a primary and often the only resource for the dying person to access the best care and support and thus, experience less suffering. A brother recalled the hard time experienced by his sister who died in an army hospital alone:

She was alone in an army hospital... The food and the care provided there were absolutely not as good as what she would get from home. If she were with us, she could have really suffered less. (Ang)

The family was considered not only an assurance of physical care, but also a source of comfort for the dying person. Interactions with family members, especially having family members present at the dying bed, was believed to contribute to a 'happy ending' for the dying person. An older man praised his family for his wife's smooth departure:

In the last few months, the children, grandchildren and even great-grandchildren came to visit her. She was so pleased to see them... She passed away being surrounded by lots of family members. It was a 'happy ending' for her. (Wu)

The family involvement could be a strong indicator of a 'good' dying and death, emphasising the significance of family ties and solidarity. In family-centred China, the supportive and intimate family relationships can strongly nurture bereaved people's sense of harmony, even when experiencing the distress of their loved one's death and dying. A number of bereaved people highlighted their experience of seeing the tears of their loved one while they were dying. As conveyed by a grandson:

He [grandad] didn't want to go [die], didn't want to leave grandma and us behind. He was too sick to say anything, so he turned his love for the family into two lines of tears. It was my first time seeing him crying, but I know it was the most genuine love from his heart. (Qian)

The tears were interpreted as evidence of the intimacy and mutual ties, thus emphasising harmony shared with their loved one and in the family.

Neglected individual agency

The pursuit of harmony in the dying process often led to not only emphasising the entity of the family, but also neglecting the individual agency of the dying person. The latter was clearly captured in cases that involved a terminal illness. A number of bereaved people concealed the prognosis to their loved one to construct a more peaceful and harmonious environment for the dying person and for the family, despite this neglecting or even violating the dying person's individual agency. A wife deliberately hid the truth from her husband who was diagnosed with advanced lung cancer, especially as their son had already been diagnosed with uraemia several years previously:

I asked the doctors and nurses to hide the labels on the bottles when they were administering the drip to him so that he wouldn't know he had cancer. I simply didn't want him to be shocked and frightened. My son had already been ill, so I couldn't see our family collapsing. (Wan)

The decision not to disclose a terminal diagnosis reflected the strong sense of family responsibility and reciprocity. As a family member, the bereaved people largely reported their experience of feeling responsible for securing a 'good' death and dying for their loved one. By seeking harmony in the distressing period of death and dying, they tended to maintain and recover their family roles in the forms of prioritising family responsibilities over emphasising the dying person's individuality.

Redefining harmony after death

In family-centred and relational China, losing a loved one could mean the loss of a family member and a key member in wider social circles, challenging bereaved people's resources for care exchange and their sense of reciprocity. As addressed above, the intimate and reciprocal relationships with the deceased were understood within a cultural context, which prioritises maintaining harmony. Facing the death of a loved one can strongly disrupt a person's taken-for-granted reality (Attig, 2011; Parkes, 1988), which in the Chinese context includes a profound concern for harmony in various respects. The analysis below aims to capture the dynamic nature of the experience, regarding how the bereaved negotiate largely traditional and changing social scripts to redefine their lives and identities in the light of three sub-themes: 'preserving ties with the deceased in a changing society', 'prioritising family roles' and 'seeking alternative resources outside the family'.

Preserving ties with the deceased in a changing society

The bereaved people often reported a sense of ongoing relationships with their loved one, believing both sides still had the power to influence each other after physical death (Klass, Silverman & Nickman,

1996). In China, conventional scripts have long shaped bereaved people's relationships with their loved ones after death (Lalande & Bonanno, 2006; Watson & Rawski, 1990). As revealed, the continuing ties with the deceased were largely nurtured by a variety of traditional beliefs and practices, including death rituals, spirituality and ancestor worship. The narratives also showed changing and often ambivalent attitudes towards the traditional forms of continuing bonds due to the aforementioned socio-political changes. Rising concerns reflecting individual preferences were also observed, especially in the accounts of those from younger generations.

Traditional ideas of harmony incorporate stability, solidarity and reciprocity in various circumstances, including relationships, not only with the living, but also with the dead (Watson & Rawski, 1990). As mentioned above, a smooth dying process could help bereaved people seek a sense of harmony in their loved one's death. Similarly, some bereaved people reported how they felt responsible for assisting their loved one in having a smooth passage to the afterworld, often involving traditional death rituals, such as memorial services on each seventh day within 49 days after death. A wife discussed how this series of rituals marked a peaceful transition for her husband's spirit and the sense of ongoing ties:

We did the 'seven-day' services for him. I was worried he would lose his way to the afterworld. Family and friends came to those services. We burned paper money and clothes and offered him his favourite food. We just hoped he would be prepared for his 'journey'. (Zhou)

The relationships could be preserved beyond death through further interactions with the deceased in the bereaved person's ongoing life. Reflecting predominant values placed on the family, such relationships could be defined through ancestor worship. Traditionally, deceased family members can be transformed into godly beings, whose identities and agency are preserved (Valentine, 2010). Some

bereaved people reported how they exchanged communication and support with their loved one as an ancestor for the harmony of their relationship as well as within the family. As a grandson said:

I sometimes try to communicate with my grandad, telling him that all of us will be good to him and to each other in the family. That's why I ask him to bless grandma for having a healthy and long life and to bless all of us with a healthy and happy life. (Tao)

Despite traditional norms of continuing bonds, the bereaved people often conveyed their ambivalent attitudes towards conventional scripts, particularly in regards to spiritual and religious aspects. As aforementioned, China experienced a period of time when many traditional norms and values, including spiritual bonds with ancestors and religious beliefs, were categorised as 'feudal superstitions' and therefore, largely suppressed. Despite these traditions having been gradually restored nowadays, some bereaved people, such as the son whose contribution is shown below, still felt a need to justify their spiritualised bonds with their loved one:

People from my generation are not supposed to believe in spirituality and religions, but I started to believe that there is another world. I completed all the rituals step by step carefully to assist my dad to have a better life in the other world. (Sun)

The diverse forms of ties with the deceased can also be seen from the changing picture of funerary practices in China, reflecting the pursuit of harmony at different levels. Some people reported few, if any, spiritualised forms of bonds with the deceased in a highly simplified and secularised funeral. One wife highlighted the existence of external pressure to conform to a 'standardised' funeral:

The funeral was quite standardised simply in a crematorium. I did feel close to him, but nothing was particularly spiritual. We had to follow fixed procedures as many others do. It was what we were supposed to do for a funeral. (Ge)

As such, a funeral could be seen as a means of seeking harmony in the wider society rather than enriching a spiritual or religious experience of preserving ties. Some bereaved people also explained how a funeral could be used to continue the social influence of the deceased and further to display harmony in their family to the broader society:

Grandad's funeral was grand. We hired a big orchestra and arranged over 50 luxury cars following the hearse... Grandad used to be a well-respected man in the village, so we wanted him to see people know he educated his children and grandchildren well and we all have a very good life now. (Tao)

The ongoing relationships could also be maintained in more individualised ways, while going against traditional customs. As reported, some bereaved people, especially those from younger generations, tended to emphasise their personal preferences rather than following traditions:

The jacket is a memory shared between grandad and me. Whenever I see it I can always feel grandad... I decided to keep it for the memory. Older people in the family told me it was inappropriate, but I didn't care. (Qian)

The above analysis shows a complex picture of the bereaved people's changing beliefs and practices of preserving ties with their loved one. Whilst these ties were strongly shaped by traditional scripts, they were also often mixed with more atheistic or individual values. Despite diverse and even competing forms of ties, their accounts have emphasised the harmonious nature of their relationships with the deceased, their family and the broader society. Furthermore, these bereaved people predominantly developed their accounts in a family context, highlighting the family as a primary resource for understanding and preserving ongoing relationships with the deceased.

Prioritising family roles

The importance of family was further evidenced in these bereaved people's narratives of emphasising their family roles in their ongoing life. By referring to the sense of family responsibilities, the bereaved people were likely to make sense of their loss through examining their roles in relation to both deceased and living family members. As conveyed by some people, failing to fulfil such responsibilities to the deceased could severely obstruct their family roles, thus leaving their loss largely meaningless. For instance, a grandson reported having developed strong feelings of regret and guilt due to his absence at his grandfather's death bed:

I feel extremely guilty and regretful because grandad had been waiting for me for a long period before he passed away. When he was dying, I didn't talk to him properly, didn't feed him and even didn't stay with him for long. I didn't accompany him to the end of his life, I feel so ashamed to be his grandson. (Liu)

Moreover, some of the bereaved people also justified their ongoing lives by highlighting the responsibilities shared with their living family members. For them, the reciprocal family ties could provide a sense of meaning, thus motivating them to continue their everyday lives. For example, when facing the death of her only son, a woman found resilience because of her granddaughter:

I won't be knocked down as I have my granddaughter to look after. I feel responsible for raising her... She is very caring to me as I am to her. She is like a little daughter to me. She has been the biggest comfort in my life. (Wang)

Clearly, the bereaved people's family roles and family responsibilities could be mutually enhanced, contributing to seeking harmony to justify their ongoing life as meaningful. The sense of harmony could be further developed by the stability and continuity of their family. A woman in her 70s reported how she had benefited from having a growing and harmonious family:

My family is my whole life now. My children and grandchildren have been brilliant. My son welcomed me to his house after my husband died. My daughter and her family often come to visit me and take me for holidays. In particular, my grandson is very filial to me. He got married two years ago and he now has his own family and child. I am really pleased to see it all happening. (De)

Seeking alternative resources outside the family

The bereaved people, as conveyed above, largely sought support and meaning from their family as a primary resource, thus illustrating their predominant identity as an interdependent family member. For those who had been excluded from the family resource by circumstances, they often had to seek alternatives from the broader society. For example, the Shidu parents, who had lost their only child, reported their efforts and struggle regarding finding alternative resources. These parents invariably pointed out how their child loss had severely impaired their family structure. Having no child to turn to in their old age, these parents also conveyed strong fears over difficulties and uncertainties in their elderly care, thus finding little sense for their ongoing lives. Whilst a few managed to receive limited support from their relatives, most of them called for there to be more security from the wider society. Due to the impact of the One-Child Policy, these parents were often determined to seek government support, whilst being unable to recover their family roles. A mother pointed out the unrecoverable absence of her son in the family:

We definitely need government support. The financial allowance and social services have been helpful but not enough. For example, social workers can't really replace a son in our everyday lives. (Lu)

Some parents participated in self-help groups, finding alternative resources for recovering their family values. Through supporting each other in many aspects, as found, they were likely to develop their sense of reciprocity largely in the sense of a family:

The group is a big family. We are all brothers and sisters, facing challenges and supporting each other together. (Jian)

As such, some parents were able to receive support and recover their sense of family to some extent. However, many family responsibilities could not be fulfilled externally. Hence, these parents were less likely to recover their family roles, leaving their lives in effect inharmonious:

I just live for now as I fear thinking of the desperate and helpless situations ahead. When I am old, no one will take care of me. What a disgrace! (Xu)

In general, the family was strongly emphasised as a primary resource for the bereaved Chinese people to adjust their ongoing lives. However, without sufficient support from the family, the bereaved people, such as these Shidu parents, were less likely to recover their identities as an interdependent family member. As a result, they were less likely to have benefited from the cultural emphasis on harmony to help them make sense of loss in their family and social lives.

Concluding discussion

The western 'selfhood' has been contested in the face of death and bereavement (Valentine, 2007b; Lawton, 2000). This article has resonated with and further expanded the ongoing debate by elaborating upon the social constructions of the relational self in the Chinese context. First, through reviewing the socio-cultural background of personhood and bereavement, this article has shed light on bereaved Chinese people's relational beings with reference to traditional norms and family values. Subsequently, qualitative data were collected and analysed to explore further the social constructions of the bereaved Chinese people's relational beings. As conveyed in the narratives, harmony as a core cultural value was extensively applied and sought within a family context to describe their experiences

before, at, and after the death of their loved one. The changing socio-cultural dynamics were also revealed, contributing to a mixed picture of the bereavement experience in mainland China.

As emerged, these bereaved people tended to develop and establish the important role of harmony to define their reciprocal relationships with their loved one before their loss. Such experiences and expectations for the continuity of reciprocal relationships strongly shaped bereaved people's identity as an interdependent family being. While facing the distressing experience of their loved one's death and dying, they showed strong motivation to reclaim their family roles by emphasising harmonious values of family ties and responsibilities. Furthermore, in recounting their experience after loss, these bereaved people presented a predominantly traditional but still mixed picture of their experience in dealing with loss in their ongoing lives. Indeed, traditional scripts largely empowered their preservation and development of ongoing family ties with their loved one in a harmonious sense. However, the continuing bonds could also be interpreted through ambivalent attitudes to traditional beliefs and practices, as well as emergent individual concerns. From a more everyday perspective, bereaved people tended to prioritise their family responsibilities to seek meaning and redefine their identities, highlighting their conformity to collective and harmonious family values. However, regarding some people without sufficient family resources, their lives could be largely inharmonious, having to face difficult challenges in order to recover their roles as an interdependent family member.

The findings from this study have drawn attention to the predominant value of harmony and the important role of the family in shaping bereaved Chinese people's relational beings in their ongoing lives. In facing and dealing with loss of a loved one, the interviewed bereaved people drew upon a largely traditional but changing body of values and norms to preserve and recover their sense of harmony in a family context. The findings, in general, can contribute to the literature by offering insight into bereavement experience in the largely under-research culture of mainland China. The study can further provide implications to bereavement care and policy-making in mainland China in relation to better responding to bereaved Chinese people's fundamental needs for harmony and

identity as a dependent family member. Given the prominence of the family in supporting bereaved people in their ongoing lives, further research could also involve exploring the life experience and issues of bereaved people who lack sufficient family support, such as those who have no family members or are estranged from it.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

Statement of ethical approval

The study was approved by the relevant university and organisations. Permission was also obtained from gatekeepers to conduct research in the participating organisations.

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